

# Welcoming the Stranger: Social Policy Perspectives on Asylum Seekers in Malta

## Introduction

Year 2015 marked the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. In his Bull of Indiction, Pope Francis called upon Catholics to return to the corporal works of mercy, including the welcoming of strangers.<sup>2</sup> Solidarity with refugees has been a recurring theme of his papacy. In his address to the EU Parliament in 2014, for instance, Pope Francis called for a “united response to the question of migration”; he cautioned against allowing “the Mediterranean to become a vast cemetery” of people who come to Europe needing “acceptance and assistance.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in addressing the US Congress in 2015, Pope Francis exhorted that “We must not be taken aback by their [refugee] numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* (11 Apr 2015), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis “Address to the European Parliament,” accessed March 12, 2017, [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/11/25/pope\\_francis\\_address\\_to\\_european\\_parliament/1112318](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/11/25/pope_francis_address_to_european_parliament/1112318).

<sup>4</sup> “Visit to the Joint Session of the US Congress: Address of the Holy Father” (21 Feb 2017), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150924\\_usa-us-congress.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.pdf).

More recently, speaking at the International Forum on Migration and Peace in February 2017, Pope Francis characterized such a response in terms of the welcome, protection, promotion and integration of migrants, the latter based not on assimilation but on mutual respect for cultural identities. This response, he added, implies three duties - the duty of distributive justice in the face of economic inequality; the duty of civility, where the “essential dignity” of migrants should never be obscured, even by administrative requirements; and the duty of solidarity, in a culture of encounter rather than a “throwaway attitude.”<sup>5</sup>

While the most recent migrant crisis has brought the issue to the fore, welcoming the stranger has always been a biblical imperative and central to Catholic faith. The Catholic Catechism, for instance, states that “the more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin” (no. 2241).<sup>6</sup> The Catechism recognizes that in their responsibility for the common good, public authorities may regulate the conditions of immigration. The extent to which countries are able “to welcome the foreigner” is, of course, a subject of considerable debate. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) notes that ever since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 first touched upon economic migration, three basic principles of Catholic social thought have evolved on immigration, viz. that “People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families ... [and while] a country has the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration ... [it] must regulate its borders with justice and mercy.”<sup>7</sup> The USCCB contends that Catholic social teaching is “realistic” in that while recognizing that no country is obliged to accept as many immigrants as would “jeopardise” its social and economic life, no nation can decide to focus solely on its citizens, and must pursue the common good for all.

This article aims to examine the situation of persons who have sought asylum in Malta. National statistics and international reports are drawn upon in an attempt to answer two questions: whether or not persons seeking asylum can be thought to have jeopardised social and economic life in Malta, and in what

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis “The Protection of Migrants is a Moral Duty,” [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/02/21/pope\\_franis\\_\\_the\\_protection\\_of\\_migrants\\_is\\_a\\_moral\\_duty/1293921](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/02/21/pope_franis__the_protection_of_migrants_is_a_moral_duty/1293921).

<sup>6</sup> “The Duties of Citizens,” in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 2238-2240.

<sup>7</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. “Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of People,” accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples.cfm>.

ways our response to asylum seekers - in terms of employment and housing - could be improved. Employment and housing have been selected to allow for greater focus, and because they are central factors in how well asylum seekers are welcomed, protected and integrated.

## Literature Review

The following brief review surveys the literature concerning two issues. First, it looks at research on whether migrants “jeopardise” social and economic life. Secondly, it looks at how the issue of migrant rights to welfare has been treated in the social policy literature.

### *The Effects of Migration*

The social effects of migration are hard to identify and measure. Concerns are often raised about social cohesion, an elusive concept that generally encompasses norms and behaviours that help bind individuals and whole societies together.<sup>8</sup> An often-cited article by Robert Putnam, based on US cities, found that ethnic diversity had negative effects on trust, altruism and cooperation, at least in the short term.<sup>9</sup> This has been rebutted in various ways, with many illustrating that it is poverty and deprivation rather than diversity that “serve to estrange people”;<sup>10</sup> that new immigration does not affect local cohesion;<sup>11</sup> and that levels of cohesion differ across localities depending upon the stories we tell ourselves about “who belongs in our neighbourhood.”<sup>12</sup>

From an economic perspective, it is difficult to draw universal conclusions about the impacts of immigration as these differ across time and country. Negative public sentiment is often based more on fear of ethnic difference rather than on hard evidence about flows or consequences. An analysis of data on immigration and economic growth in twenty-two OECD countries between

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<sup>8</sup> Andy Green and Jan Germen Janmaat, *Regimes of Social Cohesion: Societies and the Crisis of Globalisation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Putnam “*E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century*,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007): 137-174.

<sup>10</sup> Neli Demireva, *Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion* (Oxford: Migration Observatory, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Shamit Sagar, Will Somerville, Rob Ford and Maria Sobolewska, *The Impacts of Migration on Social Cohesion and Integration*, Report for the Migration Advisory Committee, UK, 2012, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/258355/social-cohesion-integration.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/258355/social-cohesion-integration.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Mary Hickman, Helen Crowley and Nick Mai, *Immigration and Social Cohesion in the UK* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008).

1986 and 2006<sup>13</sup> has found that migrants had a positive effect on both GDP per capita and on productivity growth, although these effects were small. In respect of fiscal balance more specifically, the OECD notes that when the payment of taxes is balanced with the receipt of benefits, migrants generally contribute more than they receive although the net effect on GDP is negligible. The OECD claims that “contrary to widespread public belief, low-educated immigrants have a better fiscal position - the difference between their contributions and the benefits they receive - than their native-born peers” and where this is not so, it is due to their lower earnings rather than to any greater dependence on social benefits.<sup>14</sup>

To focus specifically upon employment and housing, one concern that is often raised is that migration increases unemployment among nationals. The claim of “job theft,” though, is based on the assumption that migrants are perfect substitutes for nationals and therefore displace the latter from the labour market, whereas the two groups often differ in terms of labour market characteristics. The evidence is nuanced. Migration was found not to have caused unemployment in any of the twenty-two OECD countries between 1980 and 2005.<sup>15</sup> However, while higher-skilled nationals were found to benefit from migration (which expanded the economy and brought about an increase in job opportunities and wages in higher-skilled positions), the same may not always be the case for lower-skilled ones.<sup>16</sup> This latter group may, in a weak labour market, lose out to migrants willing to accept poorer working conditions, although this is less true of countries with a minimum wage and well-enforced labour legislation.

Housing is a scarce and costly good which vulnerable groups including migrants find hard to access. Housing quality significantly affects outcomes

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<sup>13</sup> Ekrame Boubtane, Jean-Christophe Dumont and Christophe Rault, *Immigration and Economic Growth in the OECD Countries 1986-2006*, CESifo Working Paper No. 5392, 2015, [http://www.cesifo-group.de/portal/page/portal/DocBase\\_Content/WP/WP-CESifo\\_Working\\_Papers/wp-cesifo-2015/wp-cesifo-2015-06/cesifo1\\_wp5392.pdf](http://www.cesifo-group.de/portal/page/portal/DocBase_Content/WP/WP-CESifo_Working_Papers/wp-cesifo-2015/wp-cesifo-2015-06/cesifo1_wp5392.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), “Is Migration Good for the Economy?” *Migration Policy Debates*, May 2014, <https://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/OECD%20Migration%20Policy%20Debates%20Numero%202.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Ekrame Boubtane, Dramane Coulibaly and Christophe Rault, “Immigration, Unemployment and GDP in the Host Country: Bootstrap Panel Granger Causality Analysis on OECD Countries,” *Economic Modelling* 33 (2013): 261–269.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Andri Chassamboulli and Theodore Palivos, “The Impact of Immigration on the Employment and Wages of Native Workers,” *Journal of Macroeconomics*, 38 (2013): 19 – 34; and George J. Borjas, Jeffrey Grogger, and Gordon H. Hanson, *Imperfect Substitution between Immigrants and Natives: A Reappraisal*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 13887, 2008, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w13887.pdf>.

in education, employment, health, social mobility and social cohesion.<sup>17</sup> The goal of housing integration, that is, the ability to obtain adequate, safe and affordable accommodation, with access to basic amenities and in areas that are not segregated along ethnic lines, is elusive in many countries. As in the case of employment, it is often argued that migrants compete with the poorest nationals to secure cheap accommodation, with migration reducing housing availability and pushing up rents. There is little evidence on this issue, as it is difficult to disentangle the various factors that affect rental values. A study on migration and housing in the UK has found that migrants from outside the EU often compete with their counterparts rather than with nationals for the lowest-cost rental housing, and that only over the medium- to long-term do they accumulate sufficient assets to compete with nationals for more desirable rental properties or home ownership.<sup>18</sup>

In many countries that do not have active dispersal policies, migrants tend to group together in cheap rental properties in low quality neighbourhoods, often sharing accommodation at least during their early days in the host country. While negative outcomes have repeatedly been identified for migrants living in segregated areas, such as the inability to form social networks, to gain language competence and to access transport, goods and services,<sup>19</sup> the reality is more complex. Concentration may, in some instances, have positive outcomes which should not be overlooked as they can have a strong bearing on migrants' wellbeing, such as social and cultural capital, a sense of safety and mutual support, and a common language.<sup>20</sup>

### *Migrants and Welfare*

The capacity of a country to welcome, protect and integrate asylum seekers depends to a large extent upon the way the welfare system of that country is

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<sup>17</sup> Deborah Phillips, "Integration of New Migrants: Housing," *Refugees and Other New Migrants: A Review of the Evidence on Successful Approaches to Integration*, ed. Sarah Spencer (Oxford: COMPAS, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Christine Whitehead, et al., *The Impact of Migration on Access to Housing and the Housing Market: A Project for the Migration Advisory Committee, UK* (2011), [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/257238/lse-housing.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/257238/lse-housing.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> See for instance David M. Cutler and Edward L. Glaeser, "Are Ghettos Good or Bad?," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112, no. 3 (1997): 827-872 for the US; and Tito Boeri et al., "Immigration, Housing Discrimination and Employment," *The Economic Journal* 125 (2015): F82-F114 for Italy.

<sup>20</sup> Gideon Bolt, A. Sule Özüekren and Deborah Phillips, "Linking Integration and Residential Segregation," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 2 (2010): 169.

organized, especially in terms of the range and adequacy of its social provisions and their eligibility rules. Accelerated waves of migration in recent years have brought to the fore the question of whether migrants should enjoy the same social rights as citizens. Two broad arguments have been made in this regard.

On the one hand, there are those who argue that national welfare provisions cannot be extended to migrants. The argument goes that the sustainability of welfare depends upon citizens' willingness to contribute to the public purse in order to pool their lifecycle risks in a social security system, which willingness decreases as diversity grows. Gary Freeman, for instance, contends that welfare states "are compelled by their logic to be closed systems...because a community with shared social goods requires for its moral base some aspect of kinship or fellow feeling. The individuals who agree to share according to need have to experience a sense of solidarity that comes from common membership in some human community."<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, we are reminded that a major rationale for the birth and growth of the welfare state was that it enables us to move beyond a particular to a universal solidarity. In discussing this principle, Hartley Dean recalls the classic work of Richard Titmuss on *The Gift Relationship* (1970), which defended the "welfare state as the mechanism by which, in a complex and competitive world, it remains possible for human beings to care for and to give, not just to intimates and neighbours, but, through the redistributive mechanisms of the state, to distant strangers."<sup>22</sup>

Still, while human rights are meant to cover all human beings, social rights remain very much tied up with citizenship, and countries differ in the extent to which migrants are extended similar rights to nationals. Building on the tradition of welfare regime typologies, Dean suggests that four different types, or systems, of "moral justification" for the treatment of migrants may be identified.

First, systems based on a moral-authoritarian justification see migrants as "intruders" and provide them only the most basic welfare to comply with international legal obligations. The main perceived threat is that these "intruders" would take scarce resources from nationals. Second, systems based on a social-conservative justification see migrants as "guests," extending compassion but not belonging, and sufficient welfare to protect them but not integrate them. In this case, the main perceived threat is that too many migrants would strain social solidarity and the "social order." Third, systems based on a social-liberal model see migrants as "settlers" and recognize their rights. However, these rights are

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<sup>21</sup> Gary P. Freeman, "Migration and the Political Economy of the Welfare State," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 485 (May 1986): 52.

<sup>22</sup> Hartley Dean, "The Ethics of Migrant Welfare," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 5, no. 1 (2011): 19.



made conditional upon the settlers' contribution to society, in view of a perceived threat that they would otherwise undermine economic competitiveness. Fourth, systems based on a social-democratic justification regard migrants as citizens, integrating them in cultural life and treating them equally to nationals with respect to available welfare provisions. The perceived threat here is that migrants' needs are so diverse as to make it difficult to sustain a universal welfare system.

Dean points out that given the complexities of migration, the main value of such a typology is heuristic rather than predictive, and particularly useful in helping to identify and address the ways in which migration is perceived to be of threat in any given society.

## Findings

This section will draw on available data and documentation to present a picture of asylum seekers in Malta.

### *Arrivals Since 2002: Trends and Reception*

Since 2002, more than 19,000 persons have come to Malta to seek asylum, over 90% arriving by boat. The UNHCR estimates that less than 30% (6,000 persons, or around 1.5% of the population) remain in Malta today. Between 2005 and 2015, the highest number of arrivals by boat came from Somalia (40%), Eritrea (16%), Nigeria and Egypt (6%), and the Sudan (5%). Since 2013, numbers arriving from Libya and Syria have increased. Of the 1,745 applicants who applied for protection in 2016, 37% were from Libya and 17% from Syria, followed closely by persons from Eritrea (15%) and Somalia (13%).<sup>23</sup> Like most migratory flows, the majority of asylum seekers are younger men, with three quarters being male and over one half aged between eighteen and thirty-four. Of those arriving between 2005 and 2015, 53% have been granted subsidiary protection, 4% refugee status and 3% temporary humanitarian status, while 34% were rejected and 6% of cases were closed.<sup>24</sup>

As with other EU member states, the *Reception Conditions Directive* has been transposed into Maltese legislation to provide for minimum reception standards for asylum seekers.<sup>25</sup> Since 2015, detention is no longer mandatory in all cases,

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<sup>23</sup> UNHCR “*Malta Asylum Trends 2005 – 2015*,” accessed Mar 13, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/mt/charts/>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Malta. Subsidiary Legislation 420.06. *Reception of Asylum Seekers Regulations*, accessed Aug 8, 2016, <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=10662&cl=1>.

and depends upon the immigration police's assessment based on one or more of six specific grounds as set out in the legislation. Asylum seekers who arrive regularly are not detained, and apply for protection directly at the Office of the Refugee Commissioner. Asylum seekers who arrive irregularly<sup>26</sup> are taken, on arrival, to an Initial Reception Facility for up to seven days, to be screened by the police and health authorities. At this point, the asylum seekers are assigned a case worker from the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers and are informed of their rights by the Office of the Refugee Commissioner, including the right to apply for international protection. If deemed necessary, the asylum seekers are taken to a detention centre for a maximum period of nine months. During detention, asylum seekers are given meals and medical care, and clothing when necessary, and are entitled to "open air at least once every day and for not less than one hour."<sup>27</sup> Following this period, they move to an open centre and may access the labour market. Only twenty persons are said to have been placed in a detention centre in 2016, in most instances for lacking identification documents.<sup>28</sup>

If detention is not deemed necessary, or if the persons concerned are deemed vulnerable (such as minors), the asylum seekers are taken to an open centre. The maximum stay at an open centre is twelve months, following which they are to find accommodation on the open market. In open centres, asylum seekers are provided a daily allowance of €4.66 to cover food and transport for one year (though this may be extended in cases of vulnerability)<sup>29</sup> but are not otherwise entitled to social security benefits. Persons living in open centres enjoy free movement in Malta, yet are required to confirm that they have not abandoned the centre by signing there three times a week. Around 673 persons were estimated to be in open centres in 2016.<sup>30</sup> The conditions in some of these open centres have been described as "extremely challenging," with poor hygiene, low security and over-crowding.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> While there is no universal definition of irregular migration, the International Organisation of Migration holds that "from the perspective of destination countries [migration] is entry, stay or work in a country without the necessary authorization or documents required under immigration regulations," accessed Mar 13, 2017, <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms#Irregular-migration>.

<sup>27</sup> Malta. Ministry for Home Affairs and National Security, *Strategy for the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants*, <http://homeaffairs.gov.mt/en/MHAS-Departments/awas/Pages/Migration-Policy.aspx>.

<sup>28</sup> Asylum Information Database: Malta Country Report, accessed Mar 13, 2017, <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/malta>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> UNHCR, *Malta Asylum Trends 2005 - 2015*.

<sup>31</sup> Asylum Information Database: Malta Country Report.



### *The Cost of Asylum Seekers*

No comprehensive data are publicly available about Government costings regarding asylum seekers, although partial information may be gleaned from various sources. A report on *Social Protection in Malta* states that the cost of the stay of “irregular immigrants” amounted to €6.61 million in 2015 (covering food, medical services, temporary shelter and surveillance),<sup>32</sup> having declined from €8.15 million in 2010 due to the decreasing numbers in detention. In addition, one may estimate (assuming the rate of €4.66 per diem for 673 residents) that the daily allowance payable to open centre residents amounted to around €1.14 million in 2016. Beyond open centres, those granted subsidiary protection are entitled to a core social assistance benefit, called Subsidiary Unemployment Allowance (SUA); a total of 2,432 protected persons were entitled to SUA in 2015.<sup>33</sup> The amount of this benefit depends on family size and household income, but taking the basic weekly rate of €102.04, the SAU cost for 2,432 beneficiaries would have amounted to around €12.9 million in 2015. Persons who have been granted refugee status have the same rights and duties as Maltese nationals in respect to social benefits (whether based on prior contributions or upon need) and as benefits payable to recognized refugees are subsumed under payments to nationals, they could not be estimated.

These three expenditures together amount to around €20 million, or 1.32% of total social protection in Malta in 2015 which, while sizeable, cannot be considered alarming. Furthermore, this crude estimate should also be considered against the migrants’ contribution (for instance, in terms of taxes and national insurance) which could not be estimated.

### *Housing and Employment*

Turning to housing and employment, there still remains much to be done. In the case of housing, access to decent and affordable accommodation has become problematic for those on low- and even median-incomes who lack other assets. Recent data on rental prices for unfurnished apartments show a sharp rise between 2012 and 2016, where the rents for one-, two- and three-bedroomed apartments have risen by 38%, 29% and 23% respectively over this four year

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<sup>32</sup> Malta. National Statistics Office, *Social Protection: Malta and the EU 2015*, accessed Mar 13, 2017, [https://nso.gov.mt/en/publications/Publications\\_by\\_Unit/Documents/A2\\_Public\\_Finance/Social-Protection-Malta-and-the-EU-2015.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/publications/Publications_by_Unit/Documents/A2_Public_Finance/Social-Protection-Malta-and-the-EU-2015.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Malta. Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, *Department of Social Security: Annual Report 2015*, accessed Mar 13, 2017, <http://socialsecurity.gov.mt/en/Publications/Pages/Annual-Reports-for-Social-Security-.aspx>.

period.<sup>34</sup> The average monthly rent for a two-bedroomed apartment in 2015 was €796. This is equivalent to 109% of the monthly minimum wage of €728<sup>35</sup> and 39% of the national average household disposable income of €2,060 per month;<sup>36</sup> making access to rental properties very difficult for those on low pay. This has led one anti-poverty campaigner to state that “increasing rental prices is [sic] one of the foremost issues in the social sphere and it requires immediate attention.”<sup>37</sup>

The spiral in rental prices has been attributed to the uptake of apartments by foreign nationals, though these are more likely to be persons who take up work in the buoyant financial and gaming sectors, as well as EU nationals working in Malta. It is highly improbable that asylum seeker demand for these rental properties, even among those in work, has been of a sufficient magnitude to influence rental prices in this way. Local research by Charles Pace and Leonid McKay (2013) has found that over three quarters of migrants are concentrated in six main localities characterized by higher rates of deprivation, where they reside in the private rental sector in groups of two to four persons.<sup>38</sup>

With respect to housing assistance, only recognized refugees are entitled, like nationals, to apply for social housing provided by the State, but in view of long waiting lists, gaining such access is unlikely. Refugees are also entitled to apply for rent subsidy, on similar conditions as nationals, if they have an annual income below €23,000. The amount of the subsidy depends upon income and household size and ranges from €92 to €167 per month<sup>39</sup> which, in view of current rental prices, may be helpful though not decisive in gaining access to housing. This benefit is not available to asylum seekers or protected persons, who are expected to find accommodation on the open market after their stay at an open centre.

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<sup>34</sup> “Rents Go Up, Up and ... Away,” *Times of Malta*, Aug 8, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Malta. Department for Industrial and Employment Relations, accessed Aug 14, 2016, <https://dier.gov.mt/en/Employment-Conditions/Wages/Pages/National-Minimum-Wage.aspx>.

<sup>36</sup> Malta. National Statistics Office, *Statistics on Income and Living Conditions 2014: Salient Indicators*, news release 167/2015, [https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/View\\_by\\_Unit/Unit\\_C1/Living\\_Conditions\\_and\\_Culture\\_Statistics/Documents/2015/News2015\\_167.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/View_by_Unit/Unit_C1/Living_Conditions_and_Culture_Statistics/Documents/2015/News2015_167.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> “Rising Rental Prices are Squeezing Low-Income Families,” *Times of Malta*, Aug 8, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> These localities are Marsa, Msida, Gzira, St Paul’s Bay, Hamrun and Birzebbugia. See Charles Pace and Leonid McKay, *Putting Integration into Perspective: Studying Integration Efforts of Beneficiaries of International Protection and Identifying Areas where Special Input is Needed* (Malta: Refugee Commissioner’s Office, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Malta. Housing Authority (2017), *Rent Subsidization on Privately Owned Dwellings 2017*, accessed Mar 13, 2017, <http://housingauthority.gov.mt/en/Documents/Schemes/Sussidju%20fuq%20il-Kera%20-%20English%202016.pdf>.

There are no data available to specifically illustrate the housing situation of migrants. Eurostat shows Malta to have one of the lowest overcrowding rates in the EU as well as one of the lowest housing cost burdens. However, while 3.9% of Maltese nationals live in overcrowded accommodation, this was true of 7.4% of those born outside the EU.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, while 1.1% of Maltese nationals face a housing cost over-burden,<sup>41</sup> this is true of no less than 13.1% of non-EU nationals. As these figures incorporate also those non-EU nationals who reside in Malta on the basis of a work permit and (hence) a regular income, overcrowding and housing cost burdens are likely to be far greater among the group under study.

Migrants also face housing discrimination, as evidenced in two key studies which have identified considerable reluctance on the part of prospective landlords to rent their properties to this group,<sup>42</sup> as well as discrimination (experienced in particular by male, black, Arab and Muslim individuals) in the form of verbal and non-verbal intimidation and harassment by property owners and neighbours.<sup>43</sup> This is in breach of the EU's Racial Equality Directive 2000/43/EC which prohibits direct or indirect discrimination in access to goods and services. However, ethnic minorities are often unaware of their rights or of remedies that they may pursue in the event of discrimination. Others may be aware, but may lack faith in the likelihood of a fair outcome, or may even fear retaliation.

As to the labour market, like all non-EU nationals, migrants require an employment licence to work in Malta. Refugees and protected persons are granted an employment licence in their own name; but in the case of asylum seekers, the licence is issued in the name of the employer.<sup>44</sup> The employment licences of the latter group are only issued on a six-month basis, subject to possible renewal depending upon the outcome of their application or appeal.

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<sup>40</sup> Eurostat, *Migrant Integration Statistics: Housing*, accessed Aug 8, 2016, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migrant\\_integration\\_statistics\\_-\\_housing#Housing\\_cost\\_overburden\\_rate](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migrant_integration_statistics_-_housing#Housing_cost_overburden_rate).

<sup>41</sup> The share of the population living in households where the total cost of housing accounts for more than 40 % of a household's disposable income.

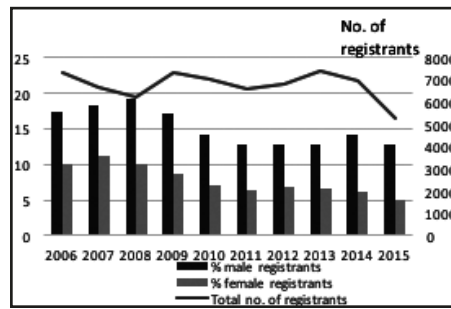
<sup>42</sup> Fondazzjoni Suret il-Bniedem, *Housing Asylum Seekers*, <http://www.pfcmalta.org/uploads/1/2/1/7/12174934/housasysseekers.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Marika Fsadni and Maria Pisani, "I'm not Racist but...": *Immigrant & Ethnic Minority Groups and Housing in Malta* (National Commission for the Promotion of Equality 2012), [https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Projects\\_and\\_Specific\\_Initiatives/I\\_m\\_Not\\_Racist/imnrb\\_research\(1\).pdf](https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/I_m_Not_Racist/imnrb_research(1).pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Jobsplus Malta, *Employment Licences Unit: Guidelines for Clients*, last modified Jun 1, 2016, <https://jobsplus.gov.mt/employers-mt-MT-en-GB/employing-persons/fileprovider.aspx?fileId=1342>.

There is little evidence as to the impact of asylum seekers on the local labour market. At 4.0% of the working-age population, the unemployment rate in Malta in June 2016 was the lowest among the EU28.<sup>45</sup> As illustrated in the accompanying graph, the proportion of all persons registering for work in elementary positions (typically the labour entry point of migrants) has, if anything, declined both in absolute terms and as a percentage of all job seekers since the increase in migration. In 2006, men registering for elementary positions amounted to 17.4% of all male job seekers; this figure had declined to 12.9% in 2015 even in the face of a 27% drop in the total number of persons seeking work.

Fig. 1 - Persons Registering for Work, 2006 - 2015<sup>46</sup>



There is no official employment rate for migrants. According to Eurostat, the employment rate in 2015 was 67.9% for Maltese nationals aged between 20 and 64, and 63.2% for non-EU citizens,<sup>47</sup> although the latter figure incorporates all third country nationals (and not just migrants as defined in this article). In their study, Pace and McKay (2013) have found that almost 60% of migrants were unemployed, and of those who worked, many were employed outside the law.<sup>48</sup> Their findings correspond closely to an estimated employment rate of 35%, which is based on 2014 data showing that 1,980 migrants (refugees, asylum

<sup>45</sup> Eurostat, *Unemployment Rates, Seasonally Adjusted, June 2016*, last modified Jul, 29, 2016. [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Unemployment\\_rates\\_seasonally\\_adjusted\\_June\\_2016.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Unemployment_rates_seasonally_adjusted_June_2016.png).

<sup>46</sup> National Statistics Office. Various, from archives: [https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/Archived\\_News\\_Releases/Pages/Archived-News-Releases.aspx](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Archived_News_Releases/Pages/Archived-News-Releases.aspx).

<sup>47</sup> Eurostat, *Employment rates of Population Aged 20–64*, accessed Aug 8, 2016, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Employment\\_rates\\_of\\_population\\_aged\\_20%E2%80%9364\\_by\\_groups\\_of\\_country\\_of\\_citizenship\\_and\\_sex\\_2015.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Employment_rates_of_population_aged_20%E2%80%9364_by_groups_of_country_of_citizenship_and_sex_2015.png).

<sup>48</sup> Pace and McKay, *Putting Integration into Perspective*.

seekers and protected persons) held an employment licence<sup>49</sup> at a time when the UNHCR estimated that there were 5,588 such persons in Malta.<sup>50</sup> In general, most third country nationals are employed in the cleaning, hospitality, care and construction sectors,<sup>51</sup> somewhat notorious for precarious working conditions.

Language barriers and lack of recognized qualifications inhibit labour market access, as does the persistence of discrimination in recruitment. As both a major trade union and a leading NGO in this field has pointed out,<sup>52</sup> although discrimination is not rare, few cases are actually reported, due to lack of awareness or fear of retaliation. This notwithstanding the fact that discrimination is specifically outlawed by Malta's Employment and Industrial Relations Act as well as the Equality for Men and Women Act, both of which make provisions for the investigation of complaints. Migrants are also more prone to be in casual or undeclared labour, meaning they are often underpaid, and deprived of health and safety provisions and social security benefits among others. As pointed out by migrants during a protest held in 2015, of those who do work legally and pay taxes and national insurance, only the minority who are granted refugee status are actually entitled to the benefits (such as pensions) that accrue from such payments.<sup>53</sup>

### *Attitudes to Migrants*

That migrants are discriminated against in the labour and housing markets appears to be widely acknowledged. According to a survey conducted on behalf of UNHCR in 2012 on public perceptions towards migrants in Malta,<sup>54</sup> 80% of Maltese believe that discrimination occurs in the labour market, while 71% believe it to occur in the housing market. However, less than one in eight respondents believe that migrants should be helped to find work or housing. In

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<sup>49</sup> "Filipina Women Top List of Third Country Workers," *Times of Malta*, Jan 12, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> This is a very crude estimate and suffers a number of flaws: it does not account for undeclared work; it might also include employment licences that are redundant because the job was never taken up or no longer performed.

<sup>51</sup> *Times of Malta*, Jan 12, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> "Gauging Workplace Abuse of Immigrants is Difficult," *Times of Malta*, Oct 8, 2013, <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20131008/local/Gauging-workplace-abuse-of-immigrants-is-difficult-.489443>.

<sup>53</sup> "Migrants to Protest Against Discrimination in Documentation and Legal Status," *Times of Malta*, Mar 12, 2016, <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20160312/local/migrants-to-protest-against-discrimination-in-documentation-and-legal.605344>.

<sup>54</sup> UNHCR, *A Report on Public Perceptions about Refugees and Migrants in Malta*, 2012, [http://www.unhcr.org/mt/charts/uploads/resources/read/files/5\\_what\\_do\\_you\\_think\\_ppr\\_2012\\_unhcr\\_.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/mt/charts/uploads/resources/read/files/5_what_do_you_think_ppr_2012_unhcr_.pdf).

general, the study found that respondents appear less likely to fear the economic impact of migrants than the social one. Only 16% feared that migrants “take jobs,” but while 68% did not personally know a migrant, almost half believed that migrants threatened their way of life.

The issue of migration is clearly a charged one. According to the Standard Eurobarometer 86,<sup>55</sup> in 2016 immigration was the issue that most preoccupied the Maltese. In fact, at 46% of respondents, the Maltese were most likely among all EU member states to consider immigration to be the “most important issue facing their country” at present (followed by the environment, at 26%; and rising prices, at 25%). Asked whether immigration evoked their positive or negative sentiment, 60% of the Maltese said they felt positive in respect with EU migrants (close to the EU28 average of 61%), but only 23% felt positive about non-EU migrants, the seventh lowest in the EU28 and 14 percentage points below the EU average of 37%.

At first, this outlook is hard to reconcile with other data sources where Malta ranks relatively high on various indicators of altruism, though admittedly more in terms of donating money than personal involvement. In the World Giving Index conducted by Gallup, the Maltese ranked eleven among the 135 countries covered for the years 2010 to 2014.<sup>56</sup> In terms of the components of this rank, Malta placed third worldwide for donating money; forty-sixth worldwide for volunteering time; and seventy-third worldwide for helping a stranger. The measurement of attitudes towards development also ranks Malta among the top 20% of EU member states in respect of support for poverty alleviation in developing countries, and for NGOs active in this area.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, the stranger in our midst is less well regarded, with not infrequent reports of racial abuse towards migrants both in person and through the blogs of local media, showing profound hostility among what one might hope is a fringe minority. Recent research by Gordon Sammut and Mary Anne Lauri (in press) has examined the different acculturation preferences of ethnic groups in Malta. While the Maltese, like all other ethnic groups, were

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<sup>55</sup> European Commission (2016). *Standard Eurobarometer 86 (Autumn 2016)*, accessed Mar 13, 2017, <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2137>.

<sup>56</sup> Charities Aid Foundation, *World Giving Index 2015*, <https://www.cafonline.org/about-us/publications/2015-publications/world-giving-index-2015>.

<sup>57</sup> European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 441: Citizens' Views on Development, Cooperation and Aid*, accessed Aug 10, 2016, [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/special-eurobarometer-441-european-year-development-citizens-views-development-cooperation-and-aid\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/special-eurobarometer-441-european-year-development-citizens-views-development-cooperation-and-aid_en).



significantly more likely to favour multiculturalism, the mean preference for multiculturalism was lowest among the Maltese compared to other ethnic groups; in addition, the Maltese expressed among the highest mean preferences for assimilation and segregation. The same researchers found that the number of ethnic friends, and the frequency of meeting them, were significantly correlated with a preference for multiculturalism, leading the researchers to call for the fostering of greater intercultural contact in order to “transform cultural diversity into added value.”<sup>58</sup> Further research by Gordon Sammut et al., illustrates the negative social representation of Arabs in Malta, largely attributed to religious differences. However, this is much less prevalent among Maltese who have Arab contacts, lending further support to the call for intercultural contact.<sup>59</sup>

Much is already being done by civil society groups that have been relentless in their support of migrants. Numerous faith-based and humanitarian NGOs<sup>60</sup> have been the agents of change and development in this area, at the forefront of efforts to represent and respond to migrants’ needs, pushing for legislative reform, improved and extended services and benefits, standing against instances of inhumane treatment and push-backs, and pressing for the development of a national integration strategy.

## Concluding Reflections

The findings presented above suggest that the impact of arrivals of asylum seekers in Malta over recent years can hardly be considered as jeopardy of social and economic wellbeing in Malta. While the cost of managing the asylum process and of providing benefits to eligible migrants is sizeable, it is not believed to be alarming, and fails to take into account the economic benefits that migrants make, both through the payment of national insurance and the filling of labour market gaps among others. Socially, migration has proven to be a more divisive issue as it is clearly a widespread preoccupation and one that appears to derive from perceived threats to Maltese cultural identity.

In the light of Pope Francis’ call for a shared response, more needs to be done to

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<sup>58</sup> Gordon Sammut and Mary Anne Lauri in *Mutual Intercultural Relations in Plural Societies*, ed. John W. Berry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>59</sup> Gordon Sammut et al., “Arabs in Europe: Arguments for and against Integration,” *Psychology & Human Mobility* (under review).

<sup>60</sup> For instance, Jesuit Refugee Service (Malta), Aditus Foundation, Integra Foundation and the Malta Emigrants’ Commission, but also, African Media Association Malta, Foundation for Shelter and Support of Migrants, International Association for Refugees, Kopin, Migrants’ Network for Equality, Migrant Women Association Malta, Organisation for Friendship in Diversity, Peace Lab, People for Change Foundation, and SOS Malta.

improve the living conditions at the open centres and to combat discrimination in the housing and labour markets; to promote the employability of migrants and to actively consider the extension of contributory benefits to those who have made the relevant contributions on the same grounds as nationals. It is also necessary to strive to transform hearts and minds by fostering inter-cultural contact and promoting mutual tolerance and respect. One trusts that the forthcoming Integration Strategy will address these matters, in partnership with the NGOs in this field and the full involvement of service users.

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